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34 Prepping in the Torah

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August 12, The Jerusalem Herald and elsewhere

Preparing for disasters, or prepping, used to be a niche that tended to attract people on the fringes of society. Preppers devote themselves to preparing for ordinary interruptions to life as we know it, such as natural disasters and power outages, and “end of the world” scenarios, such as nuclear war and the collapse of civilization. For some it is a responsible hobby, for others it is a lifestyle, even an obsession.

In the past, preppers were ridiculed for such things as hoarding supplies, building bunkers, and learning how to survive in the wilderness - but no more. The events of recent months have brought credibility to preppers, who could laugh with dismay while their relatives and neighbors frantically shopped for toilet paper. Things have settled down for the moment, but the entire world is on edge. Those who know how to best prepare for pandemics, food shortages, civil unrest, economic collapse, world war, and other nightmare scenarios are suddenly the smart person in the room. Those who mock the idea of preparing and planning have become the crazy ones.

Let's see what the Torah has to say about prepping.

1) The first example of prepping in the Torah is the famine when Yosef ruled Egypt. (I do not count Noach preparing for a year in the ark, because he was informed of the impending disaster and instructed precisely on how to prepare for it.) Yaakov instructed his sons to go to Egypt and stock up on food, lest they perish.

This instruction was preceded with a rhetorical question: “Why should you be seen?” (Bereishis 42:1). This is explained by commentators in several ways, all of which relate to prepping. Here are the two most relevant:

- Why are you looking at each other, as if waiting for your fellow to do something? There's a famine! Are you waiting for the food to run out? Go to Egypt and stock up!
- Why should other people look at you with astonishment? Everyone is concerned about the famine, and you are just sitting around. Why should they be jealous of you that you have lots of food and they don't? Go to Egypt and buy some like everyone else.

According to the first explanation, there was a real need for the brothers to buy food. Their supplies were insufficient for a long famine, and Yaakov urged them to stock up before it became a problem. This fits with the prepper mentality of stocking up for the long haul, not just for the immediate future.

According to the second explanation, they actually had plenty of food. Nevertheless, Yaakov urged them to behave as expected of people in a time of crisis, lest they attract the wrong kind of attention. This fits with the concept among preppers of blending in with one's surroundings to remain unnoticed and avoid advertising that they have the food and supplies everyone else desperately wants.

2) During the forty years in the desert, the Jews were forbidden from collecting more *man* than their daily needs, and would be left with nothing extra even if they tried. Jews who attempted to “prep” angered Hashem and failed anyway! This was intended to drive

home the lesson that our sustenance comes only from God, and we must rely on Heavenly salvation from one day to the next.

A jar of *man* was saved and kept on display in later generations to admonish Jews who devoted too much time to working instead of studying Torah. Just as God provided for their ancestors with open miracles, He would provide for them in more natural times, without need for prepping.

These two sources seem to contradict one another. The first source indicates that even those with a healthy supply of food should prepare for the long haul, even if for nothing more than camouflage. The second source seems to repudiate prepping altogether!

3) In Mishlei 6:6-11 we are taught to study the ant and learn wisdom. Chazal teach us that the ant lives for only six months, and consumes only a grain and a half of wheat. Nevertheless, the ant spends the summer gathering large quantities of food to store for many years, just in case God decides to grant it extra life. The ant is the ultimate prepper! The ant's industriousness is contrasted with the lazy person, who folds his hands and refrains from working, then has nothing to eat. The contrast between those who prepare with those who sit idle is emphasized repeatedly in Mishlei.

4) This brings us to Tzidkiyahu, the last king before the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, and the closest example in Tanach to a modern prepper. Israel's kingdom had been in decline for generations. Most of the population had already been exiled, and the remnant in Israel was subservient to Bavel. Tzidkiyahu was a vassal with little political power, even over his own people. His brothers, who preceded him on the throne, had been exiled or executed by Nevuchadnezzar for rebelling against his authority.

Tzidkiyahu knew he had a short leash and that an "end of the world" scenario for him and Israel was anything but far-fetched. Like any serious prepper, he prepared an escape plan in the event Jerusalem was invaded: a tunnel from Jerusalem all the way to the plains of Jericho, approximately 25 kilometers away!

When the city fell, he fled in his secret tunnel and should have successfully escaped. Unfortunately, God had other plans. A deer ran along the roof of the tunnel, and enemy soldiers chased it all the way to the exit point. When Tzidkiyahu emerged from the tunnel, he was immediately captured, to fulfill the words of the prophet Yechezkel.

Ultimately, all his prepping was for naught.

How can these sources in Tanach be reconciled to provide the Torah's perspective on prepping?

The first source demonstrates that responsible preparations for a clear and present danger must be taken. If there is a famine in the land, and food is available in a nearby country, one should stock up and not wait until he runs out of food.

The third source indicates that one should prepare even for scenarios that seem entirely far-fetched, like the ants gathering much more food than they can ever expect to eat. However, this is balanced by the second source, in which we are taught not to work more than necessary at the expense of Torah study. Consequently, the lesson we should learn from ants is that hard work is virtuous, nothing more. After all, ants don't need to devote time to Torah study, and therefore have nothing better to do with their extra time than endlessly prep.

Indeed, the fourth source demonstrates that prepping without divine assistance is futile. If Hashem is with us, a reasonable amount of prepping will be sufficient, and if, God forbid, Hashem is not with us, no amount of prepping will save us. Naturally, the proper balance between prepping and faith will vary based on the situation, and we can only present general philosophical guidelines.

An interesting source from Chazal is Menachos 103B. We are taught that there are three levels of accursed people who live with fear: one who purchases an annual supply of food every year, one who purchases grain on a weekly basis, and one who relies on the local

baker to supply his daily needs. Even one with enough food to last a year stares death in the face, for he might not have money at the end of the year to make his next purchase. One who relies on the local baker will go hungry the very day the baker has no bread. Only a landowner, who does not need to rely on others to supply his food, can live with a measure of confidence.

At the same time, Chazal teach us (Sotah 48B) that one who has enough bread for today and worries about what he will eat tomorrow is short on faith!

Once again, these sources balance one another. God expects us to take reasonable measures to prepare our needs, preferably in a way that we are not dependent on others for our sustenance from one day to the next. Ultimately, though, we are supposed to rely only on God, not on our own efforts and ingenuity. We must trust that if we find ourselves in extenuating circumstances, and preparing for the long-term is impossible, God will see us through the difficult times.

Chazal also teach (Kiddushin 29A) that a father is obligated to teach his son an occupation and to swim. The main form of travel in those days was by sea, and the ability to swim was like wearing a seat belt in a car: a relatively simple life-saving device for a common danger. Chazal did not expect everyone to learn how to survive extreme scenarios; the cost of such prepping does not justify the benefit. Some individuals in every community must possess the skills to deal with extreme scenarios, but the average person should content himself with reasonable preparations.

What emerges from all these sources (which are a small sample but a good representation) is that extreme prepping - in which one devotes his life to preparing elaborately for any conceivable situation - is a poor investment of time and resources. When one's life is devoted to prepping to survive anything merely for the sake of survival, then the life itself has little value.

We can store all the food in the world, all the weapons to protect it, all the hideouts if we need to flee, all the medicine and gas masks and tools and seeds and books to survive the destruction of civilization and rebuild it from scratch. No amount of prepping is enough to cover all the bases, and one slip or stroke of bad luck is enough to thwart the best prepping. Man plans and God laughs!

There are those who devote their lives to another sort of prepping: amassing enough money not only for the rest of their lives, but to support all their descendants until the end of time. This is the life of an ant, not the life of a Jew.

The Torah teaches that our life is really one big prepping exercise for life in the next world. What spiritual prepping are we doing? What Torah, *mitzvos*, and good deeds have we stored away for the long journey we will all have to take? Do we have enough?

This is one area in which panic buying is a healthy response, and no amount of prepping can be considered extreme.

One final thought: a wise prepper decides in advance at what point in the deterioration of his society he will get out of Dodge, abandon everything if necessary, and prioritize life over material considerations. Diaspora Jews historically are poor at this. They assure everyone that when things get "really bad" they will know it and leave, yet they fail at both.

If you asked Diaspora Jews ten years ago if they would leave if their society looked like it does today, they would laugh, claim that would never happen, and that they would leave if it did. Yet here we are...and there they still are, claiming that things aren't so bad.

Our Sages teach (Tamid 32A): "Who is wise? One who sees what is coming." A Jew in exile must know that his home is not permanent and be prepared to leave it. Considering the current climate, and how rapidly things are deteriorating, failing to prepare an escape from exile is reckless to the point of insanity.

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